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ABSTRACT

A theory explaining the essential nature of comedy is explored in this paper. The first part of the paper posits the theory that comedy is a relatively harmless divergence from an expected norm or outcome, and discusses the following elements of the theory: (1) the divergence from reality, (2) the notion of expectation that includes the entire view of reality, (3) the expected outcome or norm in which is embedded the "expecter's" view of reality, and (4) the relative harmlessness of the divergence, a harmlessness that may make the difference between comedy and tragedy. Examples illustrating each of these elements--selected from familiar comedic areas such as silent film comedy, the Marx brothers, and "Roadrunner" cartoons--are included. The second part of the paper tests this divergence theory and uses it as a structure for comparison of British and American broadcast comedy. The discussion of British comedy divides comedic data into the following categories: appearance versus reality, understatement, historical/mythological themes, and puns and double entendres. Examples taken from two radio programs that were popular in Britain during the 1950s and 1960s are included to illustrate these categories. The discussion of American broadcast comedy examines historical themes, puns and double entendres, and appearance versus reality. Illustrative examples from "Saturday Night Live" and "The Tonight Show" television programs are included. (Author/HTH)

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A THEORY OF COMEDY: COMPARISONS BETWEEN BRITISH AND AMERICAN COMEDY IN THE BROADCAST MEDIA

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A THEORY OF COMEDY: COMPARISONS BETWEEN BRITISH AND AMERICAN COMEDY IN THE BROADCAST MEDIA

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After a brief review of the literature, Professor McConnell posits the following general theory to explain the essential nature of comedy: Comedy is a relatively harmless divergence from an expected norm or outcome. The author explicates the elements of the theory including: 1) the divergence from reality, 2) the notion of expectation which includes an entire view of reality, 3) the expected outcome or norm in which is embedded the expecter's view of reality, and 4) the relative harmlessness of the divergence, a harmlessness which may make the difference between comedy and tragedy. The author gives examples to illustrate each of these elements of the theory with examples selected from such generally known comedic areas as silent film comedy, the Marx Brothers and Roadrunner cartoons.

In the second section of the paper, the author both tests the theory and uses the theory as a structure for the comparison of British and American broadcast comedy.

In the section about British broadcast comedy, the author divides his comedic data into the following categories: 1) appearance vs. reality, 2) understatement, 3) historical/mythological themes, and 4) puns and double entendres. Examples of British broadcast humor were taken from "The Goon Show" and "I'm Sorry, I'll Read That Again," two radio programs that were popular in Great Britain in the 1950's and 1960's.

The section about American broadcast comedy is divided into the following categories: 1) historical themes, 2) puns and double entendres, and 3) appearance vs. reality. Examples of American humor were taken from a comedic radio presentation of the 1960's titled "Stan Freberg Presents The United States Of America," a comedy television program titled "The Tonight Show" with Johnny Carson, and a comedy TV show aimed at young people called "Saturday Night Live."

The author compares his interpretation of British broadcast comedy with his interpretation of American broadcast comedy, finding a higher level of sophistication and a greater elaboration of world view in British broadcast comedy when compared to American broadcast comedy.

While recognizing that it is virtually impossible to draw valid conclusions about so broad an area as British and American broadcast comedy with the paucity of examples that can be treated in 25 pages, the author believes that both his theory of comedy and his comparisons between British and American broadcast comedy are supported by the data presented.

A THEORY OF COMEDY: COMPARISONS BETWEEN
BRITISH AND AMERICAN COMEDY IN THE BROADCAST MEDIA

There is no doubt that comedy always has been (and probably always will be) regarded as an important, worthwhile and pleasurable diversion for people of every culture and every time. In our own tradition, comedy has been present ever since Aristophanes wrote comic plays and Plato and Aristotle wrote serious commentary on the comic spirit in human endeavors. Since then, many jokes have been created and disseminated, and numerous scholars, critics and commentators have pondered the questions of what is comedy and why does it make us laugh. It is ironic to note that many of the most serious discussions of comedy and humor are among the most humorless and stodgy treatises ever written by the hand of man.

In this paper, the author will first cite some of the better known historial theories of comedy as posited by various thinkers of the past. Then the author will propose his own theory of comedy and will begin to test its applicability to various examples of humor taken from British and American culture. In other words, the goal of this paper is twofold: (1) to propose and begin testing the author's explanatory theory of comedy and (2) to use that theory as a basis for comparison between British and American comedy.

The author recognizes that it will be virtually impossible to say anything of great significance about so broad a field as British and

American comedy in so short a space as 25 pages. However, the author sees value in (1) proposing and testing the theory of comedy and (2) to use that theory as a basis for comparison between British and American comedy.

At this point, the author would like to outline briefly two sets of theories about comedy. First, there are the objectivist theories as expressed by Plato, Aristotle and Cicero. These theories see comedy as something "out there," extrinsic to the person who laughs.

For example, in the Philebus, Plato says that "the ridiculous is a certain kind of badness":

> Those who are both deluded and weak, unable to avenge themselves when laughed at, may rightly be described as "ridiculous"; but those who can retaliate might more properly be called "formidable" or "hateful."[1]

Plato's view might be called the humor of contempt, with the laugher finding humor in the weakness of another.

Aristotle takes a similar view of comedy in the Poetics:

> Comedy is . . . an imitation of characters of a lower type; it does not, however, involve the full range of villany, but only the ludicrous, a subdivision of the ugly or base. The ludicrous consists of some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive.[2]

This is a view of comedy which was evidently shared by the English poet and playwrite Shakespeare because he expressed comedy mainly through his lower-

class characters such as Falstaff, Fluellen and Mistress Quickly.

The Roman orator Cicero also expresses this view when he says:

> All matter for ridicule is therefore found to lie in defects observable in the characters of men not in universal esteem, nor in calamitous circumstances, and who do not appear deserving to be dragged to punishment for their crimes.[3]

This view expresses the idea that comedy is to be found in situations that evoke neither aversion nor compassion but that laughter may be somewhere in between these two reactions.

There is another group of theorists about comedy which finds the source of comedy in the one who laughs. These theories may be termed subjectivist because they tend to find the explanation for comedy "inside" or in the mental or emotional state of the person who laughs. For example, Hobbs views laughter as a "sudden glory" in which one suddenly rejoices in his superiority over another.[4] The German philosopher Kant theorized that laughter arises "from a strained expectation reduced suddenly to nothing,"[5] a view which is, oddly enough, similar to Aristotle's theory of catharsis in the viewing of tragedy. Another German philosopher Schopenhauer expressed the view that laughter came from the "incongruity of sensuous and abstract knowledge."[6] The French poet Baudelaire claimed that laughter originated from a fault, not in the thing that is occasion for mirth, but in the one who laughs. For him it is a consequence of the Fall of Man and Original Sin, a result of man's alleged fallen nature, a kind of original

joke.[7] The English essayist William Hazlitt said, "We laugh at what only disappoints our expectations in trifles."[8] He goes on to say that if the situation is more than trifling, it is occasion for sympathy, or distress, or, at least, serious consideration. Finally, the protomodern psychologist Freud regarded comedy as arising from a perceived difference of "expenditure" between the laugher and the laughee. In other words, if the person being laughed at "makes too great an expenditure on his bodily functions and too little on his mental ones."[9] According to Freud, the laughter comes from a feeling of superiority over someone who is physically inept on mentally unable in comparison with the laugher.

These are by no means all of the theories of comedy ever conceived because there have been hundreds of poets, scholars, writers, philosophers and even comedians who have theorized and commented on the nature of comedy. In practical terms, it would require a small encyclopedia to cover all of them. Instead, the author has quoted a small sample of the theories which seem most relevant to this discussion. While it is a truism that none of the historical theories of comedy have been regarded as 100% satisfactory in explaining the phenomenon of comedy, the author would like to make an attempt to develop a theory of comedy which will overcome the subjective vs. objective of the previous theories cited herein (supra). The author will attempt to do this by developing a theory of comedy which synthesizes the subjective view, the objective occasion or artifact, and the relation between the two which, when taken together as a whole, can be viewed as a theory explaining the underlying structure of comedy.

At this point, we should specify that we are not talking about laugh-

ter, which may occur with or without comedy, and which may be caused by factors other than comedy, factors such as nervousness, physical substances introduced into the body, or even tickling. What we are talking about is comedy which, like other forms of art such as tragedy, epic, novels or poetry, is made by humans, partly for their own enjoyment, and partly to shed some light on the human condition. As Horace once said of poetry, its function is to delight and to instruct; so it is with comedy under the theory that I am about to propose.

The Theory of Comedy

What we look for in a theory is a succinct, elegant yet broad statement which is capable of explaining and tying together a host of seemingly unrelated phenomena. We look for a theoretical statement which reveals the underlying structure of various phenomena and shows how a phenomenon works. The phenomenon in question here is comedy and the theory I am proposing is this:

> Comedy is a relatively harmless divergence from an expected outcome or norm.

First, let us analyze what the theory means. The notion of comedy as a divergence from reality is common in the literature. Comedy is not a mirror-like reflection of reality as anyone sees it; rather, comedy is a portrait of unreality or non-reality when compared with the reality from which it diverges. To put it another way, it is a distortion of reality

which is apprehended instantly and which often, but not always, causes laughter. When a man walks down the street, it is not funny. It is merely a picture of everyday, hum-drum reality. But when the man walks down the street, slips on a banana peel, and falls, that is comedy when it is done in the context of art. Unless the man is badly hurt, which seldom happens with professional actors, the act is laughed at because the act of slipping and falling in a clumsy fashion is a divergence from everyday reality as most people know it. (This is made even more comic if the man is either stiff and pompous, or is dressed in a clown suit.) This divergence from reality accounts for the objective element in my theory, i.e., something happens "out there" in the real world.

The second element in this theory is the notion of expectations. Somebody has to do the expecting and that person does his expecting based on his view of reality which, as we all know, varies from person to person, from group to group, and from culture to culture. This explains why one and the same joke is funny to one person or group and not funny to another. For example, when we joke that it takes six Polacks to change a light bulb, one to hold the bulb, and six to turn the ladder, we can expect in advance that the Polish community will not be amused. They are not amused because they know from direct experience that Polish people do not change their light bulbs in that manner. It is too far-fetched and is seen as not a humorous distortion of reality but as a crude lie about a certain group of people. But if we change the term "Polack" to "moron," then the Polish community may indeed be amused for, presumably, they would "expect" a moron to behave in a stupid manner. To explain this joke further, the expected

norm is that a person would unscrew the bulb with his wrist; the divergence comes when the Polack or moron does it the hard way with a group of assistants turning the ladder.

The third element in this theory of comedy is the expected outcome or norm. Comedy reveals the world view of the people who laugh because they see in the comic act or comic statement a divergence from their view of reality. To use a relatively universal example, it is not funny or out of the ordinary when a man looks at you or, in art, looks into the lens of a camera. This is a picture of normal reality. But when the actor looking into the camera is suddenly hit in the face by a banana cream pie, the humor is instantly apprehended because it is a relatively harmless divergence from the expected norm, i.e., that in humdrum quotidian reality most people do not get hit with pies most of the time. The element of the expected norm or outcome, which in fact is the laugher's view of the world the way it is or should be, is the point in the theory of comedy which shows its relational quality. In all comedy, there must be someone to laugh or at least perceive and there must be something to laugh at. Comedy occurs when the laugher and the object of laughter are brought together; for, if a comic event occurs with no one to see it, then there is no one for the event to relate to, and thus no comedy. Like the philosopher's tree in the forest which falls with no one to hear, the event for practical purposes has not occurred to anyone's perception.

The fourth element in the theory of comedy is the notion of it being relatively harmless. To use the example of the pie in the face, if the man had been hit with a cannon ball rather than a cream pie, the event would

not be funny at all because the event was harmful. The proper response to this would be horror or pity or outrage at the perpetrator even though the event would fit the theory of comedy in other respects. It might be counterargued here that some types of comedy involve a degree of "harm" such as when Grouch Marx insults someone or Harpo Marx shears off somebody's tie or Wile E. Coyote is blown to bits by a bomb he intended for the Roadrunner. The examples from the Marx Brothers are easy to answer because all that is happening usually is that someone's pompous, distended ego is being humorously deflated. Little harm is actually happening to the fictional character. Indeed, if Groucho Marx did visit great harm upon his fictional victim, then most people including the author would not find it funny at all. Rather, they would find it evocative of pity or outrage instead of laughter.

The problem posed by the mayhem which regularly occurs to Wile E. Coyote is a bit more difficult to explain, yet can still be accounted for in terms of the theory. When we see a fictional human character in a book, play, film or TV program, we are asked to suspend our disbelief for the duration of the fictional presentation and to react to him as if he were real. We see in such fictional art a mirror of the real world where things happen like they do in the real world and where the audience reacts the way it would in real life. But when we see Wile E. Coyote in a cartoon, there is no disbelief to suspend because we do not believe the cartoon to mirror the reality that we live in but rather to have a fictional reality of its own in which anything conceivable can happen. Thus, when Wile E. Coyote is blown up, or falls off a mile high cliff, or is

flattened by a steamroller, it is literally a relatively harmless divergence from his normal existence, since his normal existence is to be destroyed one way or another and then to return a few seconds later, with no visible sign of injury, to renew his futile quest.

Scholars familiar with the literature of humor studies may recognize this as a variant of incongruity theory which has been widely discussed over the past few decades by such scholars as Goldstein and McGhee. Indeed, my theory is similar to the incongruity theories in its essence but my theory goes beyond the other incongruity theories insofar as it posits an entire world view embedded in both the expected outcome and the divergence.[10]

The Theory Tested

Now that the theory has been outlined in detail, it is time to test it against the data, in this case, a set of British and American comedy events taken from the broadcast media of each country. First, we will look at a British comedy which was originally presented on "The Goon Show," a radio comedy which aired on the BBC during the 1950's and 1960's. Then we will compare the British comedy to some American comedy taken from a number of diverse American broadcasts.

The significance of The Goon Show is that it was an early comedy showcase on radio where some major British comedians got their start. It was a 1950's British precursor of the popular American program "Saturday Night Live" and was immensely popular with its original British audience.

BRITISH BROADCAST COMEDY

According to the theory of comedy under discussion, comedy is a relatively harmless divergence from an expected norm or outcome. The norm or outcome constitutes a picture of reality which exists in the head of the expecter or the person who laughs at a comedic event. Sometime, however, the divergence itself reveals another picture of reality. When this occurs, the joke becomes even funnier as in this example:

Appearance vs. Reality

In a skit about the Great Flood which had occurred, according to Biblical reports, because man was so sinful and corrupt that God's only solution was to drown everybody except Noah and his family, and start over, Noah, amid prolonged sound effects of crushing thunder and tumultuous water says in a distraught tone of voice, "Oh, what must the neighbors think!" The expected outcome here is that Noah might express fear and trepidation, might pray to God that he be spared, or at least might somehow recognize the extreme gravity of the situation. This is what most normal people would do in such a situation. The deviation comes when he expresses concern for what the neighbors think (assuming there still were neighbors), thus revealing another view of reality, i.e., he felt British (and American) need to maintain appearances. This joke reveals a portrait of Noah who is less concerned about the internal sinfulness of Man and its punishment, but more concerned about the external, apparent commotion it has caused. The joke also points out the trend from a "sin culture" which is more concerned about following absolute moral values, to a "shame cul-

ture" in which the greatest embarrassment is in losing face or looking bad, a trend which anthropologists have pointed out as occurring in Twentieth Century Western industrialized and developed cultures.

Much humor can be found in the British attitude and practice of keeping up appearances. There is the official culture, symbolized by the Royal Family, which believes in and supports the values of tradition, ceremony, orderliness and fair play. Yet, behind the facade, there is the low culture of scandal sheet newspapers Fleet Street, boozers, ruffians and punk rockers. One example taken from the "Goon Show" serves to illustrate this

> Announcer: "This is the BBC."
> Pompous Voice: "The blame shall be spread equally."
> Comic Voice: "That's right. There are so many in the BBC that the blame can be spread so evenly that it doesn't even notice.
> Pompous Voice: "How dare you reveal BBC's cover up methods!"

The pompous voice represents the official culture while the comic voice expresses a recognition of the reality behind the facade. The very presumption that the official culture is hiding anything or fooling anybody is occasion for endless British humor.

In terms of the theory of comedy being proposed herein, the pompous voice represents the expected outcome: The BBC would be gracious, merciful and scrupulously fair in response to some unspecified transgression that had taken place. But the divergence stated by the comic voice also

presents a view of the world which is equally true: When the blame is spread equally, then there is no one left to blame.

Understatement

The theory of humor being explicated herein is capable of explaining a wide diversity of types of humor. One form of humor which is particularly British is the use of understatement. For example, in "The Goon Show" there is a skit about an Arctic expedition in which the explorers are being attacked by a dive-bombing war plane: (SFX: Eeeooooooomm!). Under the theory of humor, the expected outcome is that they would cry to their mates, "Look out; run for cover." Instead, the British comment is, "Oh, drat these Arctic mosquitoes." Again, a particularly British view of the world is revealed, both in the expected outcome which gives us a picture of the heroic British explorers valiantly struggling against all adversity for King and Country, and in the divergence of the comment which bespeaks the British penchant for keeping a "stiff upper lip" and good humor regardless of whatever might happen. Another way of looking at this joke would be to call it the hyperbolizing of the mosquito into a dive bomber; in any event, part of the humor comes from the quantitative discrepancy between the occasion for the comment and the comment itself.

Historical/Mythological Themes

Another characteristic of British humor is the use of historical or mythological themes for humorous ends. One such theme is the King Arthur legend which is used as a vehicle for humor in a program titled "I'm Sorry, I'll Read that Again." A heroic sounding voice intones

> We are in the banquet (hall) of King Arthur. Above the table are the Arms of King Arthur and under it, his legs.

The pun here is between the Arms of King Arthur as a heraldic crest and as a physiological part of his body. The Narrator continues

> On the wall is the Great Seal of England.
> Arf, arf, arf!

Obviously, the Great Seal is not a marine mammal, but it is entertaining to apprehend it in that context.

What both of these pun-based jokes show is an expected outcome and a divergence, both of which show two different views of the world which exist simultaneously in the British people. On the one hand, the expected outcome is a straight, factual description of King Arthur's banquet hall. The banquet hall is symbolic of the whole complex of Arthurian legend of which the British are both conscious and proud, since they have used it many times in their serious literature and still read it to their children. On the other hand, the divergence in the form of a pun is a recognition that Arthur was human too: he had legs under his banquet table as well as "arms" on the wall. This shows the peculiar British ability to take their history and mythology seriously, for the values and attitudes it presents, while still being able to laugh at it at the same time.

Puns and Double Entendres

A form of British humor which is also popular in America is the regional or provincial joke. In England, from a London point of view, Wales is and always has been inherently funny. It is a remote, provincial area, with an economic base of extractive coal industries and a population that talks with a regional accent. The nearest American equivalent would be West Virginia, about which there are similar jokes pointing up the backwardness and presumed lack of sophistication in the area.

> Narrator: "Today's subject is Wales."
>
> Interloquitur: "Thar she blows!"
>
> Narrator: "At the Cardiff town hall I just asked to see the Lord Mayor, but was told he had just popped out for a leek."

This joke about the leek, a lily-like plant which is the national flower of Wales, is at least as old as Shakespeare. In Henry the Fourth, Part II, a character named Fluellen who speaks in a thick Welsh accent, calling, for example, Alexander the Great, Alexander the Big and mispronouncing it so it comes out Alexander the Pig, is enraged when Henry Hotspur, a warrior on the side of King Henry the Fourth, tells him to go and eat his leek which he wears proudly into battle. This points up one of the differences between England and Wales: in England they make soup from leeks; in Wales they wear them as national symbols. This joke, employing a pun on the word "leek," is all the funnier because of the wide range of traditional associations that the word possesses.

But now let's look at this joke in terms of the theory of humor that the author is proposing. First there is the expected outcome which indicates a view of the world. In this case, Wales is viewed as a comic hinterland in which the Lord Mayor of Cardiff is such a crude, coarse buffoon that he would perform his bodily function of urinating outside the town hall, much as Billy Carter is said to have done from his back porch in Georgia. Yet the divergence which is in the other pun-meaning of the morpheme "leek," has to do with the lily-like plant that is the national symbol of Wales. It is this juxtaposition between a proud, heraldic national symbol and a base bodily function, all in the same morpheme, that makes for the richness and depth of British humor.

What we find in all of these examples of British humor is a richness of attitude and perception constituted by the apparent fact that both the expected outcome and the divergence in these jokes present views of the world which, although sometimes conflicting, are held simultaneously by the British audience.

AMERICAN BROADCAST COMEDY

When we consider American humor in comparison to British humor, one fairly apparent difference between the two is the American's quantitatively lesser use of themes from American history and mythology for humorous purposes. Of course, there are some sniggering Playboy Magazine style jokes about how George Washington "slept here" and thus became the "Father of his country;" but, in the main, there is not a great use of such American historical/mythological themes as George Washington, Abe Lincoln, Davy Crockett, Daniel Boone and other similar American heroes who could

consititute a humorous equivalent to the King Arthur legends. One reason for this, of course, is that most Americans still regard their own historical/mythology as a kind of hagiography--something to be taken very seriously. Evidently, Americans have yet to achieve sufficient distance from their own historical legends to make them a source of levity.

Use of Historical Themes

One noteable exception to this general analysis is a comedy record album of the early 1960's created by a commercial artist and comedic talent and titled "Stan Freberg Presents the United States of America." This album starts out in the Court of Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of Spain, where Christopher Columbus is treated as a bohemian who is full of wild, half-baked ideas. (The King calls him "Old Round-World Chris.")

One comedy skit from this album which illustrates my theory of comedy well is an episode where Columbus and the King have just landed in the New World. An Indian walks up to them and says, "How?" They say something about how they just arrived by ship and then they proclaim:

> "We have just discovered America! Isn't that great?"
>
> The Indian replies, "No, it is <u>we</u> who have just discovered you!"
>
> Columbus: "How do you figure that?"
>
> Indian: "We just discover you here on beach. It is all in how you look at it."

The richness of the humor here comes from the fact that both the expected outcome, i.e., "Yes, it's great that you've discovered America," and the divergence, i.e., "no, we Indians discovered you," represent entire world views belonging to various elements in the audience. First, there is the ethnocentric, chauvanistic Old World view of reality which held that European civilization represents the basic standard of all civilization and that anything else is something new, different: a discovery. Second, there is the mirror image of this view held by Native Americans who knew all along that America was there but who found Columbus to be something new.

The comic exchange on the beach continues:

> Indian: Well, now that you're here, what are you going to do in the New World?
>
> Columbus: I have a dream!
>
> Indian: Tell me about your dream.

At this point the expected outcome is that Columbus is going to launch into a paean of praise about Freedom, Democracy and the American Way. Instead, Columbus says:

> "I want to open up the first Italian Restaurant in the New World. Spaghetti, ravioli, cholesterol; all the finer things."

Again, the richness of the humor comes from the encapsulation of

another world view in the divergence. The idea of Columbus having the ambition to open a restaurant is funny; but it also expresses the world-view that this New World will be used for business and enterprise.

The skit continues:

> Indian: Where are you going to get the money for the restaurant?
>
> Columbus: I'll just go down to the nearest bank and apply for a loan.
>
> Indian: You can't. Banks are closed today.
>
> Columbus: Why is that?
>
> Indian: Today Columbus Day!

If we grant the preposterous premise (as we must in all humor) that there are banks around on the day Columbus discovered America, then the expected outcome is that there is some logical reason for the banks being closed. The divergence, i.e., "Today Columbus Day!," presents a whole world view of the imminence of Columbus's accomplishment. The mere fact that Columbus stumbled onto America while looking for India meant that more Europeans would come, European culture would be assimilated into the American continent, and Columbus's discovery would be honored with a holiday. From the point of view of the Indians on the beach, it was a dark day, indeed. Yet they stoically accepted it and adjusted to it, mainly because they had no other choice. History has documented the

colonialist, expasionist and imperialistic behavior of the Renaissance European states; Columbus can be seen as the point man for that whole movement into the American continent, when looked at from a Native American point of view.

It seems unfortunate that contemporary American broadcast humorists do not use historical/mythological themes to a greater extent, since they can provide an excellent vehicle for humor.

Puns and Double Entendres

An area in which American humor is very similar to British humor is the area of puns and double entendres. In this area of humor, the theory of humor which the author is proposing applies well since the pun or double entendre contains both the expected outcome and the divergence in the very same word or phrase. Two examples taken from recent (1984) episodes of the "Tonight Show" will illustrate this point.

First, there is the Johnny Carson monologue which opens the "Tonight Show." The monologue always employs topical references and a few sexual innuendos, one of which constitutes the following example:

> Carson: Did you know there was a small earthquake last night? Did you feel it? Yes, last night at 4 AM I felt the earth move. Trouble was, I was alone at the time.

The expected outcome of this joke is that Johnny is going to tell a

factual account of his experience with the earthquake. The divergence is that the phrase "the earth moved" is an allusion to the way that Hemmingway described sexual orgasm in A Farewell to Arms. (Robert Jordan's girl friend said it.) From a literary point of view, it seems commendable that, first, Carson would use such a literary allusion for humorous purposes, and, second, that his studio audience would understand it.

The second example of pun or double entendre comes from the NBC program "Saturday Night Live" also broadcast in 1984 and hosted by Joan Rivers. Rivers is a comedian who seems to get laughs, in part, simply from the clownish persona she presents to her audiences. With her rapid-fire delivery of jokes which she meticulously collects on a word-processor, her habit of clapping her hands like a seal clapping its flippers, her Jewish accent and Jewish jokes, and her incessant put-downs of herself and everybody else, she presents the public image of a clown or a fool, an image which is itself inherently funny since it constitutes a harmless divergence from the quotidian reality that we all experience. (In other words, everyday people aren't like that.)

But her jokes are sometimes richer than her comic persona, which depends on its outlandishness for its humor. For example, Rivers was talking about an experience common to women, that of having a baby.

> Rivers: A woman should scream when she is having a baby. Why? Because that is her day, her unique accomplishment. I screamed when I was having my first child. (She screams: Arrrgh!) And that was just during conception.

The expected outcome of this joke is that she was screaming in pain while having the baby. The divergence of the joke which makes it funny is all in the scream because, in this case, it is an ambiguous scream which can present a picture of reality to two different audiences simultaneously. In other words, the scream could be one of pleasure or one of discomfort, depending on the audience's basic attitudes toward the sexual experience. In this instance, Rivers is able to elicit laughter from her total audience even though individual members of the audience may have widely differing attitudes toward the subject of the joke.

Appearance vs. Reality

Like British humor, American humor uses the discrepancy between the appearance of things and the supposed reality behind the appearance as an occasion for comedy. An example of this was found on an NBC "Saturday Night Live" program telecast on Sept. 8, 1984. The scene takes place in heaven in a bar called "God's Place" and the bartender is St. Peter. The central character in this skit is John F. Kennedy who is portrayed as an insecure, out-of-work actor who is commiserating with St. Peter about how Gary Hart is stealing his act. Other patrons of the bar seen sitting around at tables are George Washington, Charlie Chaplin, Babe Ruth and Abraham Lincoln. While the basic conceit of the skit is mildly amusing to the studio audience, the biggest laugh comes when the phone rings:

> St. Peter: Oh, hello Mrs. Lincoln . . . Just a minute, I'll see if he's here.

At this point, the camera cuts to a shot of Mr. Lincoln who is seen sitting at a table with a black woman. Lincoln shakes his head and signals with his hands that he is not here.

Audience: (A big laugh)

St. Peter: No, Mrs. Lincoln. Abe's not here. Honest.

The skit continues to its conclusion, but the shot of Lincoln and the black woman got the biggest laugh. In terms of the theory of comedy, this tells us something about the audience's view of reality, an audience which we are safe in assuming is mostly young people of college age. The expected outcome of this scene is that Lincoln, whom we all know as "Honest Abe" and the "freer of the slaves" from American history, would come to the phone and speak to his wife. The humorous divergence is the image of Lincoln as a philanderer and a liar. A secondary suggestion in this visual gag is that the real reason Lincoln freed the slaves was because he was attracted to blacks in general and black women in particular. While none of this humorous image of Lincoln is historically accurate to any degree, the joke as a whole does show a tendency in American humor to debunk American heroes and to show that they have feet of clay. American humor differs from British humor, at least in this instance, because the humorous divergence does not show another view of reality which exists in the audience's mind (as was the British skit about Noah mentioned earlier); rather, it merely shows a randomly contemptuous view of Lincoln as just

another two-timing male who hangs out in bars and consorts with bar girls.

It is difficult to believe that this view of Lincoln is seriously entertained by anybody. As Gore Vidal pointed out in his recent biography, Lincoln, the great President was remarkable, not for his views or actions vis a vis slavery, but for the way that he decisively dealt with the severest Constitutional crisis in American history, seizing the Republic and forcing it to become the strong federal system that it is today.

Conclusion

This has been an obviously brief and highly selective survey of British and American comedy seen in terms of a comprehensive theory of comedy that the author is proposing. There are two things to consider in these concluding remarks: the general theory of comedy and the comparison of British and American humor.

First, the theory of humor which the author is proposing seems to be adequate in all of the cases discussed herein because it is capable of showing the underlying structure common to a widely divergent set of comedy events, both British and American. The theory does not presume to explain all comedy because, in the scope of this short paper, it has not been tested against all types of comedy events. However, based on the comedic data presented, the theory offers a succinct, yet elegant structural explanation capable of covering a broad range of comedic events.

Second, when comparing British and American comedy in terms of the theory, there seems to be a higher level of sophistication in British comedy owing to the longer and stronger historical/mythological traditions

present in British culture. The King Arthur legends have been around ever since the Middle Ages; thus, references to them in comedy are easily understood and appreciated by the British audience. There is also greater use of Biblical themes for comedic purposes as evidenced by the Noah skit mentioned earlier.

Another apparent difference between British and American comedy, based on the evidence presented here, is the greater use of sexual themes and sexual jokes in American comedy. This American penchant for sexually suggestive comedy is probably evidence of and a reaction to the rigid Puritanical traditions of self-control and self-denial which have been present in American culture since the Pilgrims arrived in 1620. While it is probably true that the British and all other cultures use some sexual themes for comedic purposes, there seems to be a greater emphasis of this theme in American comedy, an emphasis which probably indicates a fundamental confusion and insecurity about values surrounding the subject. For when the American audience laughs at Johnny Carson saying, "the earth moved," and "I was alone at the time" (an allusion to masturbation), when Joan Rivers says she screamed during the conception of her child (an allusion to pleasure or discomfort), and when "Saturday Night Live" presents an image of Lincoln consorting with a black woman (an allusion to miscegenation), what is really being presented is a world view in which the values and norms of behavior surrounding sex are confused and uncertain. While there may not be more confusion and insecurity about sexual values in America than in Britain, such confusion does seem to be more evident in American comedy.

Finally, in terms of the theory, there seems to be less richness in American comedy than in its British counterpart. In British comedy, both the expected outcome and the divergence often represent fully elaborated world views, often built up over centuries of historical/mythological tradition. In the British skit about Noah and the Flood, both the traditional Biblical view of the extreme corruption of man and its punishment by God, and the British social standard of the need to keep up appearances, are presented in the same joke. By comparison, American comedy often presents a fully elaborated world view in the expected outcome of the joke, but only presents a randomly grotesque distortion of the expected outcome in the divergence. No one seriously believes that Lincoln was involved in miscegenation; yet that was the world view or attitude presented in the "Saturday Night Live" skit about JFK and that was the element in the skit that caused the loudest laugh in the American audience.

Similarly, both Johnny Carson's allusion to masturbation and Joan Rivers suggestion of pleasure or discomfort during conception do not present fully elaborated world views; they just present gross distortions of an expected outcome.

It can be concluded from all of this that the theory of comedy proposed herein is a useful tool for analyzing a wide diversity of comedic events. The theory is also capable of pointing out subtle yet fundamental differences between British and American comedy, comedic differences which reflect cultural differences in world views between the two nations. If comedy can be viewed as a serious cultural expression of attitudes, values and world views, just as art, literature, poetry, films and even television

programs are, then much can be learned about how different audiences view the world, based on the jokes they find laughable. The author hopes that other researchers will test this theory against their own comic data in an effort to find out just how far the theory can be extended.

As stated earlier, it would be difficult to say anthing of significance about the broad range of British and American broadcast humor in so short a paper based on such a paucity of examples. What I have tried to do in this paper is (1) to propose and begin testing a theory of humor and (2) to seek a direction for further research based on a few examples taken from British and American broadcast humor. I believe that, based on these few examples above, my conclusions about British and American broadcast humor are warranted. However I freely admit that the subject is much too vast to be adequately treated in a 25 page paper and that it would probably require a book to do the topic justice.

In any event, I have taken a theoretical position and started out in a specific direction for cross-cultural comparisons of humor. I invite other scholars and researchers to comment on the work at this point.

NOTES

[1] Plato, Philebus, Numbers 47-50, tr. B. Jowett, in Theories of Comedy, ed. Paul Lauter (New York: Anchor Books, 1964), p. 7.

[2] Aristotle, Poetics, Chapter V, tr. S.H. Butcher, in Theories of Comedy, op. cit., p. 13-14.

[3] Cicero, De Oratore, Book II, Ivii. 235, tr. George Barnes and J.S. Watson, in Theories of Comedy, op. cit., p. 25.

[4] Hobbes, Leviathan, Part I, Chapter vi, (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill Co., 1958), p. 57.

[5] Kant, Critique of Aesthetic Judgement, Book II, Section 54, tr. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Publishing Co., 1951), p. 177.

[6] Shopenhauer, The World as Will and Idea, Vol. 1, Section 13, tr. R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1964), p. 76.

[7] Baudelaire, "On the Essence of Laughter," in The Mirror of Art, tr. and ed. by Jonathan Mayne (New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. 131ff.

[8] William Hazlitt, Lecture on the Comic Writers Etc. of Great Britain, Lecture I (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1910), p. 5.

[9] Sigmund Freud, Jokes a d Their Relation to the Unconscious, tr. James Strachey, Chapter vii, in The Complete Psychological Words of Sigmund Freud (London: Hogarth Press, 1960), p. 181-236.

[10] Jeffery H. Goldstein and Paul E. McGhee, The Psychology of Humor (New York: Academic Press, 1972), p. 9.